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# ...DAMIANA...

(The Mexican Tea)

***TURNERA APHRODISIACA.***

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By JOHN URI LLOYD.

## DAMIANA (The Mexican Tea): *Turnera aphrodisiaca*.

By *John Uri Lloyd*.

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About thirty years ago, Dr. F. O. St. Clair of Washington, D. C. introduced Damiana to the medical profession of the United States. The botanical name was not known to Dr. St. Clair, but was afterward determined as *Turnera aphrodisiaca*. It became my duty, in 1881, to describe the drug and its (then) sophisticant (*Aplopappus discoides*) for the American Dispensatory, the article being published in advance by Dr. Charles Rice, editor of the American Druggist. I now find myself in the home of Damiana, and am enabled to supplement that paper, as well as, I believe, correct certain generally accepted popular American errors concerning the drug. La Paz, Lower California (Baja California), is the principal Damiana port of export, and information obtained on the ground may be considered authentic.

The Name. Damiana is the Mexican name of the plant which yields the leaf sold under the name. So far as I can discover, this name has no significance. Possibly, in days gone by, the term might have possessed a specific meaning, but more likely it is an heirloom of the Indians that inhabited the Peninsula, before the Spanish invasion. Be that as it may, the term Damiana is familiar to every Mexican, but concerning the meaning and derivation of the word, all concur in that it is simply the name of the plant.

The Plant. The leaf of Damiana is now too familiar a drug to necessitate detailed description, the fragrant, olive-green leaf being well known to pharmacists. The plant is a low shrub, the bushy head of which is prone upon the ground, from which descends the gnarled, often twisted root stem, and spring the coarse twigs. This root is tough, hard, the central part (about one third) being brown, the remainder yellow. The main root stalk averages an inch or more in diameter, from which project tough side roots the size of a lead pencil, gray externally, but yellow within. From extreme to extreme, a damiana plant may average two to four feet, root measurement, but is less in depth. The tough stems make a scraggly bush, two

to three feet high. In the dry season, which includes most of the year, the tough, brittle root seems to be nearly devoid of moisture. It may even be seemingly as dry as the dust about it, as is true of the specimens now before me, but I am told that this sapless specimen of vegetation, gray and forlorn as is the hot dry sand and soil about it, on the first touch of rain, will put forth a mass of foliage, and with wonderful activity will become a living bush, which, when the few days of rain are over, dries again in the sand, and slumbers through the long season of heat and dust. Cattle and other animals are fond of Damiana, and it is asserted that a peculiar, sweet flavor is imparted to the flesh of such creatures during the Damiana season.

Damiana, I am told, is practically confined to the lower part of the Peninsula, of Lower California, from which, mainly from the port of La Paz, it is exported, the larger amount now going to the United States. Its habitat, even here, is in the foot hills inland, the main supply coming from forty miles west of La Paz, thence being abundant towards the town of Todos Santos, on the Pacific shore. It grows in patches or clumps, with spaces, sometimes of considerable size, between the bunches. It is gathered by the country people, and for exportation is packed in bales of convenient size, coarse coffee sacks being usually employed. I find in local use, small square bales in calico casing, each holding two litres, but it is generally retailed loose by grocers, as tea is sold in America,. The difference in the quality of Damiana is very great, owing both to care in curing, and to its condition when gathered, as well as to its age, for by age it loses much of its aroma, and fragrance. The Mexican is particular concerning this latter point, and highly values a freshness in quality. It should be nearly devoid of stems, of a lively, olive-green color, a grateful, delightful fragrance, and should impart an aromatic, slightly astringent taste when chewed. As found in commerce, the small leaf is much broken. When gathered in the flowering season, it is in very best condition, and is most highly valued by Mexicans when the flowers are present. They prize the flavor in this mixture of leaf and blossom.

**Sophisticants.** (Ash Damiana.) The only plant that is here confused with Damiana is a related shrub of similar appearance and growth. Its leaf resembles Damiana in contour, and is possessed of a similar odor and taste. It differs in general in that it has a

more grayish (ash) color (due to a coat of silky down), and a more wooly touch and appearance, lacking the lively, olive-green color of the true, crisp leaf. This plant is not only downy to the touch. but the leaf, leaf-stem, and buds are also pubescent, the leaf being thick and leathery, as contrasted with the brittle, thin leaf of true Damiana,. This species is found abundantly within twenty miles of La Paz, while the true species is not abundant east of the foot hills that center the peninsula. This ash species is not used by the Mexicans, and yet, by one inexperienced, it might readily be taken for Damiana. I have discovered that the leaf of this plant has been largely sent to the United States, the gentleman giving me this information calling it "Bastard Damiana." Although it should be considered a sophisticant, its sensible properties so nearly resemble Damiana as to indicate that pharmaceutical preparations can not be readily differentiated. \*

Damiana Root and Shrub. I am reliably informed that an attempt is being made to put the root and shrub on the market as a drug substitute for the leaf. Owing to its weight it will be a cheap sophisticant, and may serve the purpose of a cheap substitute. But I cannot, discover any of the qualities of Damiana in either the root or shrub. The final result of such procedure (owing to the restricted locality in which damiana grows), will be to exterminate the plant, and increase The price of Damiana. The Mexican Government should at once take steps to prohibit the exportation of Damiana root, and thus preserve the industry, and protect this important Mexican tea.

**Mexican Uses of Damiana.** Damiana is the native Mexican tea, and is used exactly as tea, is employed in the United States. Although its use is now largely confined to the poorer classes, it is a favorite beverage throughout the Peninsula,, and also, I am reliably informed, elsewhere throughout Mexico, although this latter statement I have not personally verified. It may be likened in this respect to our domestic Sassafras, which is yet used as a beverage, in a limited way in rural districts, in many sections of the United States. Damiana is consumed in Mexico as a stimulating beverage, and is not used as a drug, although its qualities are both soothing and stimulating. That it may have, occasionally, an aphrodisiac

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\* I have taken steps to obtain the different species of shrub, and when their botanical names are determined will supply this deficiency. A dealer in Damiana assures me that another "Bastard" species exists, intermediate between those I have described.

property, in Mexican view, is evident from the fact that in one case a Mexican who met Americans often, ascribed to it that character. But I find, after patient and particular investigation in the Mexican home of Damiana, that it is universally served as tea, to men, women, and children alike. I am therefore inclined to believe that a Mexican statement concerning its aphrodisiac qualities is a reflex touch from American advertisements, or American statements. Its repute here is that of a pleasant, gentle stimulant, and it is also employed as a hot drink when the menses are suppressed. It is also used in colic, the statement being that a strong, hot tea of Damiana, will bring quick relief. This statement I have also verified from a heavy native exporter of the drug. The fact that Damiana tea is used so extensively, demonstrates that it is harmless, while its employment for persons of both sexes and of all ages indicates that it is not considered a drug exclusively for purposes such as are asserted to be its reputed qualities in American medicine. I am therefore inclined to accept without reserve that the reputed qualities of this drug, as accepted in America, are not based on its Mexican use or reputation.

Damiana, is a fragrant, slightly astringent, gentle stimulant, or tonic, which in its habitat serves a useful purpose. Its long continued use is not followed by nervousness, as is the case with tea and coffee drinking. I made careful and exhaustive inquiries to ascertain if any ill effect followed its habitual use, and found none whatever. On asking for a cup of Damiana tea at the hotel where this article is written, it was served me without comment, the proprietor stating that he kept the leaf constantly on hand, and considered it a harmless beverage, adding that some people drink it exclusively. I found it not unpleasant to the palate.

And now the question may be asked, is it possible that so many American physicians who have prescribed Damiana, have erred in their opinion of the drug? In reply it may be stated that it is not unlikely that, in some instances, a gentle, aromatic stimulant like Damiana may accomplish aphrodisiac effects. In my opinion, however, the shot-gun method of prescribing Damiana has maintained for this innocent drug its chief reputation in a field where error originally placed it. As a rule, Damiana, is associated in prescriptions with Phosphorus, Nux Vomica, Strychnine, Iron compounds, and

such powerful agents as these, where its gentle companionship is dominated by its powerful associates. Or, the name "Damiana," is used as a trade mark term for proprietary preparations in which the other ingredients are concealed. Few physicians employ it alone, and such therapeutical authorities as I know to have investigated it in a pure condition, assert its inefficiency as an aphrodisiac. Like the harmless Spreading Viper, to which a general public has erroneously ascribed most virulent attributes, but which is almost helpless and is perfectly innocuous, so Damiana has been broadly heralded as a remedy in a field where its innocent qualities forbid it a conspicuous place.

**Resumé.** Damiana is a Mexican shrub, its habitat being on the peninsula of Lower California, inland from La Paz. It was introduced to American medicine under a misunderstanding of its nature. It is not a Mexican drug, but a general beverage. Its qualities reside in a fragrant leaf, yielding to hot water a pleasant, harmless: tea-like beverage which, so far as history determines, has been consumed from all time by the Mexicans, and is still so employed by all classes, men, women and children alike.\* It is a gentle stimulant or tonic, kindly in action, pleasant to the taste, and acceptable to the stomach. Its medicinal qualities are mainly restricted, in Mexico, to cases where a gentle stimulant may be effectual, as in suppressed menses, in which it is desirable to administer a hot drink in connection with a grateful aromatic that will not, disturb the stomach. In other words, Damiana is a homely, domestic remedy, innocent of the attributes under which, in American medicine, it has, for a quarter of a century, been forced to masquerade. Its American field is now restricted, but in its true position the use of Damiana may be broadened. A freshly made tea of prime, recent Damiana, herb, when it can be procured, is perhaps the most desirable form of administration, or a concentrated cordial representative of the drug, of exceptional freshness and of prime palatable as possible, made to carry the full qualities of Damiana.

La Paz, Mexico, February 10th, 1904.

\*I have met the very best in society, who drink Damiana tea through choice. poorer classes use it almost exclusively.